

Sewer rates will start going up on Jan. 1

DAVE DAVIS
Plain Dealer Reporter

A much-discussed and long-dreaded sewer rate increase will begin in January, raising the amount people pay by 75 percent or more in the next five years.

The higher sewer rates, OK'd Thursday by the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District board, take effect Jan. 1 and include deep discounts for the elderly, the poor and those who conserve water.

Under the new rates, a typical suburban residential customer will see quarterly bills rise next year by about \$14 to \$104.

Over five years, the average suburban household's quarterly bills will go from \$90 today to \$157 in 2016, while for the average Cleveland household the increase will be from \$84 to \$154. (The increase is a little steeper for Cleveland residents because they have paid less than the suburbs for sewer service, a discrepancy that's being eliminated.)

The sewer rate increase comes on the heels of a hefty increase in water fees by the Cleveland Division of Water. In most cases the two utilities share customers and are billed together.

SEE SEWER | A6

SEWER

FROM A1

Rates will go up starting Jan. 1

Following six public meetings and comments by hundreds of members of the public, the sewer board voted 4-2 on Thursday, with little comment, to approve the new rates. Board members Dean DePiero and Gary Starr voted no.

Starr, mayor of Middleburg Heights, read a statement that he released to the media before the meeting, calling the rate increase a "tax" and a "shameless money grab" and the public hearings a "ruse."

Starr asked how an elderly resident on a fixed income would pay the rate increase. "My colleagues have to know that their vote today will send a horrible message to our constituents — that everyday people don't count," he said.

Parma Mayor DePiero didn't speak on the issue during the meeting but afterward was careful to distance himself from Starr. DePiero said the district has done a good job since 2005 of controlling costs, and he praised the staff.

He said he voted against the rate increase because he didn't approve of the heavy-handed tactics of the federal government in a \$3 billion consent decree that the district signed with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

That agreement, the largest single factor in the rate increase, requires the district to make expensive system improvements, including digging seven massive tunnels, to reduce the amount of untreated sewage dumped into waterways, usually during heavy rains.

"The federal government put the gun to the sewer district and made us the bad guys," DePiero said.

The new rate plan offers a break to customers who conserve water by doing away with the minimum quarterly charge of about \$48 for 7,480 gallons of water. Sewer rates are based on water use, and water-saving customers paid this charge even though they used less water. They are expected to save money the first couple of years with a total five-year quarterly increase of about \$10.

Board President Darnell Brown, Cleveland's chief operating officer, noted that the rate increase plan included discounts for the district's most vulnerable customers — the elderly and low-income.

Sewer district approves five-year rate hike

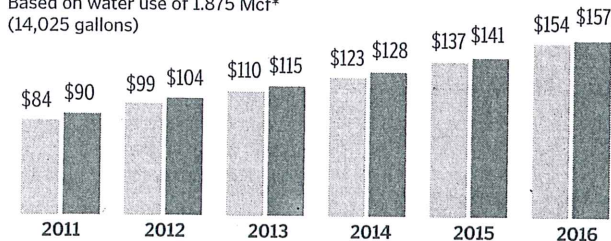
Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District customers are going to be paying an average of 13 percent more for service every year for the next five years, according to a rate hike approved Thursday. The higher sewer rates take effect Jan. 1 and include deep discounts for the elderly, the poor and those who conserve water. Below are the quarterly bills for different types of customers.

Quarterly bills under the new rates

■ Cleveland customer ■ Suburban customer

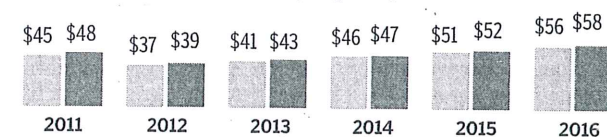
Typical household

Based on water use of 1.875 Mcf* (14,025 gallons)



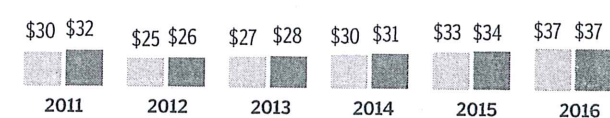
Small water use

Based on water use of 0.63 Mcf* (4,712 gallons)



Homestead discount for elderly and low-income

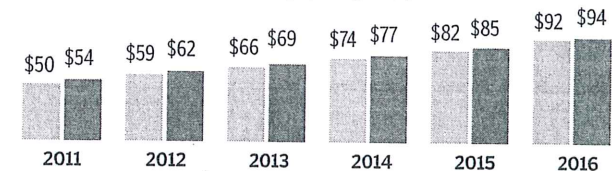
Based on water use of 0.63 Mcf* (4,712 gallons)



Wastewater Affordability Program

For households with income no higher than 175 percent of poverty level, or \$35,000 for a family of four.

Based on water use of 1.875 Mcf* (14,025 gallons)



* A Mcf = 7,480 gallons

SOURCE: Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District

DAVE DAVIS AND KEN MARSHALL | THE PLAIN DEALER

erly and low-income.

The board gave elderly customers a deeper discount, from 33 to 40 percent, under the Homestead Program for homeowners age 65 and older. A typical Homestead Program customer will see quarterly bills go up just \$7, from about \$30 today to \$37 in 2016.

The Homestead Program in the past has often been overlooked by thousands of seniors. Only about half the people who qualify are actually taking advantage of the discount, according to a Plain Dealer analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Homeowners must meet income guidelines and submit a new application every year, which they can get by calling the sewer district at 216-881-8247.

Additionally, sewer district of-

ficials created a new Wastewater Affordability Program, which also offers a 40 percent discount to homeowners of any age. To qualify, your household income must be at or below 175 percent of the federal poverty level, which is \$29,050 for a family of three.

And board members Thursday also approved a new Crisis Vouchers Program, meant to assist customers who have extraordinary medical expenses, have lost jobs or have experienced a financial hardship such as divorce.

Under the program, a 12-month payment plan will be established and water shut-off actions suspended, and the district will pay the first six months of sewer charges up to \$300.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: ddavis@plained.com, 216-999-4808